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THE

Motive and Habit of Reading.

BY CHARLES F. RICHARDSON.

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M. SMITH

THE CHOICE OF BOOKS.

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THE MOTIVE OF READING.

"Of making many books there is no end," said the wisest of men three thousand years ago; and he added the equally true statement that "much study"—that is, much reading—"is a weariness of the flesh." A fourteenth century commentator, in considering this text, drew the conclusion that no books may rightly be read save "the bokis of hooli scripture," and "other bokis, that ben nedeful to the understonding of hooli scripture." Modern readers, reared outside the close atmosphere of mediæval cloisters, are of course not so narrow in their interpretation of this text; but all will agree that a wise choice must be made from the great stores of literature that the ages have accumulated, from the days of papyrus scrolls and birch-bark writings, to these times, when scarcely any country town is without its

Mss. J. Univ. of Louisville, v.1, no.7, [illegible]

printing-press. "We are now," says Disraeli, "in want of an art to teach how books are to be read, rather than to read them; such an art is practicable."

The very first thing to be remembered by him who would study the art of reading is that nothing can take the place of personal enthusiasm and personal work. However wise may be the friendly adviser, and however full and perfect the chosen hand-book of reading, neither can do more than to stimulate and suggest. Nothing can take the place of a direct familiarity with books themselves. To *know* one good book well, is better than to know something *about* a hundred good books, at second hand. The taste for reading and the habit of reading must always be developed from within; they can never be given from without.

All plans and systems of reading, therefore, should be taken, as far as possible, into one's heart of hearts, and be made a part of his own mind and thought. Unless this can be done, they are worse than useless. Dr. McCosh says: "The book to read is not the one that thinks for you, but the one which makes you think." It is plain, then, that a "course of reading" may be a great

good or a great evil, according to its use. The late Bishop Alonzo Potter, one of the most judicious of literary helpers, offered to readers this sound piece of advice: "Do not be so enslaved by any system or course of study, as to think it may not be altered." However conscious one may be of his own deficiencies, and however he may feel the need of outside aid, he should never permit his own independence and self-respect to be obliterated. "He who reads incessantly," says Milton,

> "And to his reading brings not
> A spirit and judgment equal or superior,
> Uncertain and unsettled still remains,
> Deep versed in books, but shallow in himself."

The general agreement of intelligent people as to the merit of an author or the worth of a book, is, of course, to be accepted until one finds some valid reason for reversing it. But nothing is to be gained by pretending to like what one really dislikes, or to enjoy what one does not find profitable, or even intelligible. If a reader is not honest and sincere in this matter, there is small hope for him. The lowest taste may be cultivated and improved, and radically changed; but pretense and artificiality can never grow

into anything better. They must be wholly rooted out at the start. If you dislike Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and greatly enjoy a trashy story, say so with sincerity and sorrow, if occasion requires, and hope and work for a reversal of your taste. "It's guid to be honest and true," says Burns, and nowhere is honesty more needed than here.

It should always be borne in mind that the busiest reader must leave unread all but a mere fraction of the good books in the world. "Be not alarmed because so many books are recommended," says Bishop Potter; "and do not attempt to read much or fast;" but "dare to be ignorant of many things." There are now 1,100,000 printed books in the library of the British Museum alone; and the library of the Bibliotheque Nationale of Paris contains more than 3,000,000 volumes. An experienced librarian has estimated that not less than 25,000 new books now appear annually; and yet the reading of a book a fortnight, or say twenty-five books a year, is quite as much as the average reader can possibly achieve—a rate at which only 1,250 books could be read in half a century. Since this is so, he must be very thoughtless and very timid

who feels any shame in confessing that he is wholly ignorant of a great many books; and on the other hand, none but a very superficial and conceited reader will venture to express surprise at the deficiencies of others, when a little thought would make his own so clearly manifest. In Cowper's words:

> Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much;
> Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.

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THE READING HABIT.

THERE are some persons who are so fortunate as to be unable to tell when they formed the habit of reading; who find it a constant and ever increasing advantage and pleasure, their whole lives long; and who will not lay it down so long as they live. There are men and women in the world whose youth and whose old age are so bound up in the reading habit that, if questioned as to its first inception and probable end, they could only reply, like Dimple-chin and Grizzled-face, in Mr. Stedman's pretty poem of "Toujours Amour:" "Ask some younger lass than I;" "Ask some older sage than I." Happy are those whose early surroundings thus permit them to form the reading habit unconsciously; whose parents and friends surround them with good books and periodicals; and whose time is so apportioned, in childhood and youth, as to permit them to give a fair share of it to reading, as well as to study in school, on the one hand, and physical labor, on the other. It is plain that a great

duty and responsibility thus rests upon the parents and guardians and teachers of the young, at the very outset. It is theirs to furnish the books, and to stimulate and suggest, in every wise way, the best methods of reading.

Just where, in this early formation of the reading habit, absolute direction should end and advice begin, is a matter which the individual parent or guardian must decide for himself, in large measure. Perhaps there is greater danger of too much direction than of too much suggestion. It is well to give the young reader, in great part, the privilege of forming his own plans and making his own choice. Of this promotion of self-development Herbert Spencer says: "In education the process of self-development should be encouraged to the fullest extent. Children should be led to make their own investigations, and to draw their own inferences. They should be *told* as little as possible, and induced to *discover* as much as possible. Humanity has progressed solely by self-instruction; and that to achieve the best results each mind must progress somewhat after the same fashion, is continually proved by the marked success of self-made men. Those who have been brought up under the

ordinary school-drill, and have carried away with them the idea that education is practicable only in that style, will think it hopeless to make children their own teachers. If, however, they will call to mind that the all-important knowledge of surrounding objects which a child gets in its early years is got without help, if they will remember that the child is self-taught in the use of its mother's tongue; if they will estimate the amount of that experience of life, that out-of-school wisdom which every boy gathers for himself; if they will mark the unusual intelligence of the uncared for London gamin, as shown in all directions in which his faculties have been tasked; if, further, they will think how many minds have struggled up unaided, not only through the mysteries of our irrationally-planned curriculum, but through hosts of other obstacles besides, they will find it a not unreasonable conclusion, that if the subjects be put before him in right order and right form, any pupil of ordinary capacity will surmount his successive difficulties with but little assistance. Who indeed can watch the ceaseless observation and inquiry and inference going on in a child's mind, or listen to its acute remarks on matters within the range

of its faculties, without perceiving that these powers which it manifests, if brought to bear systematically upon any studies within the same range, would readily master them without help? This need for perpetual telling is the result of our stupidity, not of the child's. We drag it away from the facts in which it is interested, and which it is actively assimilating of itself; we put before it facts far too complex for it to understand, and therefore distasteful to it; finding that it will not voluntarily acquire these facts, we thrust them into his mind by force of threats and punishment; by thus denying the knowledge it craves, and cramming it with knowledge it cannot digest, we produce a morbid state of its faculties, and a consequent disgust for knowledge in general; and when as a result partly of the stolid indifference we have brought on, and partly of still continued unfitness in its studies, the child can understand nothing without explanation, and becomes a mere passive recipient of our instruction, we infer that education must necessarily be carried on thus. Having by our method induced helplessness, we straightway make the helplessness a reason for our method."

After making all needed deductions from the

somewhat impatient spirit in which Mr. Spencer here speaks, it can hardly be questioned that the young reader—and most of these suggestions apply equally well to those who begin to read later in life—will do much for himself; and that, on the whole, he stands in greater need of a judicious guide and helper than of a rigorous ruler and taskmaster. Of course, if he lacks both guidance and government, the latter is better than nothing; and there are times when only stern commandment will avail. But the rule should be made in accordance with the large purpose of helpfulness. The reading habit is a growth, a development, not a creation; and all measures for its cultivation, whether from without or within, should be made with this fact in mind. And where strict and even stern regulation is necessary, the direction will be most profitable that best succeeds in causing itself to be assimilated in the mind of the governed, as a part of that mind, and not as a foreign addition.

Whether the reader, thus helped by wise counselors, be young or old, he should soon become familiar with the advantage of making his reading a part of his daily life. Miss Edith Simcox, one of the wisest of living Englishwomen, thus

presses this point : "No part of a child's school knowledge can be safely allowed to remain long detached from its daily life. The history and geography of lesson books must join on to that of the newspapers; it is almost worse to know the name and date of a writer or a hero, without an independent familiarity with the nature of his books or actions, than to be frankly ignorant of all at once; and in every branch of science it is admitted that a knowledge of definitions and formulæ is useless apart from experimental acquaintance with the actual bodies described. An inaccurate general knowledge, that would not stand the test of examination, may even in some cases have more educational value than a few correct and barren facts; and our educational results will not be thoroughly satisfactory if detailed information is imparted faster than circumstantial impressions about its color and bearing."

Mr. Ruskin, too, has recently spoken of the duty of brightening the beginnings of education, and of the evils of cramming, against which, happily, the tide of the best contemporary thought is now setting strongly,—never to ebb, let us hope. "Make your children," he says, "happy

in their youth; let distinction come to them, if it will, after well spent and well-remembered years; but let them now break and eat the bread of Heaven with gladness and singleness of heart, and send portions to them for whom nothing is prepared; and so Heaven send you its grace, before meat, and after it." Of the necessity of making attractive the beginnings of reading, Edward Everett Hale says: "In the first place, we must make this business agreeable. Whichever avenue we take into the maze must be one of the pleasant avenues, or else, in a world which the good God has made very beautiful, the young people will go a-skating, or a-fishing, or a-swimming, or a-voyaging, and not a-reading, and no blame to them." How much can be done by others in making the literary path pleasant, is known to the full by those whose first steps were guided therein by a wise father, or mother, or teacher, or friend. How strongly the lack of the helpful hand is felt, none who have missed it will need to be told.

But those who must be their own helpers need not be one whit discouraged. The history of the world is full of bright examples of the value of self-training, as shown by the subsequent suc-

cess won as readers, and writers, and workers in every department of life, by those who apparently lacked both books to read and time to read them, or even the candle wherewith to light the printed page. It would be easy to fill this whole series of chapters with accounts of the way in which the reading habit has been acquired and followed in the face of every obstacle. But a single bit of personal reminiscence may be taken as the type of thousands; not only because of its touching beauty and its telling force, but because it is the latest to be told. To-morrow some other man of eminence will add no less strong testimony to the possibility of self-education. It is the story told by Robert Collyer, who worked his way from the anvil in a little English town, up to a commanding position among American preachers and writers. "Do you want to know," he asked, "how I manage to talk to you in this simple Saxon? I will tell you. I read Bunyan, Crusoe, and Goldsmith when I was a boy, morning, noon, and night. All the rest was task work; these were my delight, with the stories in the Bible, and with Shakespeare, when at last the mighty master came within our doors. The rest were as senna to me. These were like a

well of pure water, and this is the first step I seem to have taken of my own free will toward the pulpit. . . . . I took to these as I took to milk, and, without the least idea what I was doing, got the taste for simple words into the very fiber of my nature. There was day-school for me until I was eight years old, and then I had to turn in and work thirteen hours a day. . . . . From the days when we used to spell out Crusoe and old Bunyan there had grown up in me a devouring hunger to read books. It made small matter what they were, so they were books. Half a volume of an old encyclopædia came along—the first I had ever seen. How many times I went through that I cannot even guess. I remember that I read some old reports of the Missionary Society with the greatest delight. There were chapters in them about China and Labrador. Yet I think it is in reading, as it is in eating, when the first hunger is over you begin to be a little critical, and will by no means take to garbage if you are of a wholesome nature. And I remember this because it touches this beautiful valley of the Hudson. I could not go home for the Christmas of 1839, and was feeling very sad about it all, for I was only a boy; and

sitting by the fire, an old farmer came in and said: 'I notice thou's fond o' reading, so I brought thee summat to read.' It was Irving's 'Sketch Book.' I had never heard of the work. I went at it, and was 'as them that dream.' No such delight had touched me since the old days of Crusoe. I saw the Hudson and the Catskills, took poor Rip at once into my heart, as everybody has, pitied Ichabod while I laughed at him, thought the old Dutch feast a most admirable thing, and long before I was through, all regret at my lost Christmas had gone down the wind, and I had found out there are books and books. That vast hunger to read never left me. If there was no candle, I poked my head down to the fire; read while I was eating, blowing the bellows, or walking from one place to another. I could read and walk four miles an hour. The world centered in books. There was no thought in my mind of any good to come out of it; the good lay in the reading. I had no more idea of being a minister than you elder men who were boys then, in this town, had that I should be here to-night to tell this story. Now, give a boy a passion like this for anything, books or business, painting or farming, mechanism or music, and

you give him thereby a lever to lift his world, and a patent of nobility, if the thing he does is noble. There were two or three of my mind about books. We became companions, and gave the roughs a wide berth. The books did their work, too, about that drink, and fought the devil with a finer fire. I remember while I was yet a lad reading Macaulay's great essay on Bacon, and I could grasp its wonderful beauty. There has been no time when I have not felt sad that there should have been no chance for me at a good education and training. I miss it every day, but such chances as were left lay in that everlasting hunger to still be reading. I was tough as leather, and could do the double stint, and so it was that, all unknown to myself, I was as one that soweth good seed in his field."

With young or old, there is no such helper toward the reading habit as the cultivation of this warm and undying feeling of the friendliness of books,—in which subject Frederick Denison Maurice found enough to write a whole book. If a parent or other guide seems but a task-master; if his rules are those of a statute-book, and his society like that of an officer of the law, there is small hope that his help can be made

either serviceable or profitable. But with the growth of the friendly feeling comes a state of mind which renders all things possible. When one book has become a friend and fellow, the world has grown that much broader and more beautiful. Petrarch said of his books, considered as his friends (I borrow the translation from the excellent treasure-house of quotations on books and reading, prefixed by Dr. Allibone to his "Dictionary of Authors"): "I have friends, whose society is extremely agreeable to me; they are of all ages, and of every country. They have distinguished themselves both in the cabinet and in the field, and obtained high honors for their knowledge of the sciences. It is easy to gain access to them, for they are always at my service, and I admit them to my company, and dismiss them from it, whenever I please. They are never troublesome, but immediately answer every question I ask them. Some relate to me the events of the past ages, while others reveal to me the secrets of nature. Some teach me how to live, and others how to die. Some, by their vivacity, drive away my cares and exhilarate my spirits, while others give fortitude to my mind, and teach me the important lesson how

to restrain my desires, and to depend wholly on myself. They open to me, in short, the various avenues of all the arts and sciences, and upon their information I safely rely in all emergencies." "In my study," quaintly said Sir William Waller, "I am sure to converse with none but wise men; but abroad it is impossible for me to avoid the society of fools." Sir John Herschel called books "the best society in every period of history:" "Were I to pray for a taste which should stand me in stead under every variety of circumstances, and be a source of happiness and cheerfulness to me during life, and a shield against its ills, however things might go amiss, and the world frown upon me, it would be a taste for reading. Give a man this taste, and the means of gratifying it, and you can hardly fail of making him a happy man; unless, indeed, you put into his hands a most perverse selection of books. You place him in contact with the best society in every period of history—with the wisest, the wittiest, the tenderest, the bravest, and the purest characters who have adorned humanity. You make him a denizen of all nations, a contemporary of all ages. The world has been created for him." Among his books, William Ellery

Channing could say: "In the best books, great men talk to us, with us, and give us their most precious thoughts. Books are the voices of the distant and the dead. Books are the true levelers. They give to all who will faithfully use them, the society and the presence of the best and greatest of our race. No matter how poor I am; no matter though the prosperous of my own time will not enter my obscure dwelling, if earned men and poets will enter and take up their abode under my roof,—if Milton will cross my threshold to sing to me of Paradise; and Shakespeare open to me the world of imagination and the workings of the human heart; and Franklin enrich me with his practical wisdom,—I shall not pine for want of intellectual companionship, and I may become a cultivated man, though excluded from what is called the best society in the place where I live. . . . . Nothing can supply the place of books. They are cheering and soothing companions in solitude, illness, or affliction. The wealth of both continents could not compensate for the good they impart. Let every man, if possible, gather some good books under his roof, and obtain access for himself and family to some social library. Almost

any luxury should be sacrificed to this." And one cannot wonder that Fenelon said: "If the crowns of all the kingdoms of the empire were laid down at my feet in exchange for my books and my love of reading, I would spurn them all;" or that the historian Gibbon wrote: "A taste for books is the pleasure and glory of my life. I would not exchange it for the glory of the Indies."

All these words of wise readers show that he who rightly cultivates the reading habit can not only have the best of friends ever at hand, but can at length say with all modesty, if he reads aright and remembers well: "My mind to me a kingdom is."

The foregoing pages are from "The Choice of Books," by Charles F. Richardson, a very beautiful volume of 208 pages, its sixteen chapters treating of the following subjects:

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